

always well dressed, in the new clothes and jewelry given to her by her husband and other villagers. She was immediately considered a part of the husband's family and, in time, would gradually assume her responsibility of helping maintain the needs of the family.

The new bride was also given a portion of the family land to grow her crops. The land remained hers until she died or left the family through a divorce. As G. T. Basden notes,

Traditional Ibo marriage was not merely a man taking to himself a wife. It was more than that; it was the bringing in of another person into the family. She was something more than a wife; henceforth she was a member of the clan, has her rightful place and shared in all things pertaining to it.⁹⁰

Polygamy

Part of the reason women did not share the same house as their husbands was that polygamy was legal in traditional Ibo society, and most men had more than one wife. Consequently, each wife needed a house for herself and her children. As Victor Uchendu, an Ibo ethnographer, emphasizes, "Among the Ibos, married life was the normal condition for both men and women; polygamy, a symbol of high social status, was the ideal."⁹¹ Most traditional Ibo men had two wives; those who were wealthy had up to ten or more wives.

Traditional Ibo culture has often been condemned by scholars because of its practice of polygamy. They argue that polygamy was an indication of the degraded status of Ibo women. "But seeing polygamy solely as a practice that devalued women is wrong and a misconception,"⁹² states Leith-Ross. Polygamy did not degrade Ibo women. Polygamy was simply a reflection of a farming commu-

nity's needs in meeting some of its immediate demands for survival. As other scholars have pointed out, polygamy served important social and economic functions for the community, specifically for the women.

The Functions of Polygamy

"The practice of polygamy was a matter of survival for the women and the entire community,"⁹³ writes Margaret Green. Traditional Ibo economy was based on subsistence farming, and each family's survival depended on how much it could produce on the farms. Polygamy assured that enough children would be born to help farm and sustain the family. Since large portions of forest farmland needed to be cleared, tilled, and cultivated for proper sustenance, a man, his one wife, and few children were simply incapable of doing all the work. Those who tried it, as the people soon found out after the missionaries came, either lived in perpetual poverty or the women died in the effort to bear more and more children.

Polygamy also provided a reprieve for the women. "In fact, many women in traditional Ibo society not only condoned polygamy, they suggested that their husbands 'get' a second or third wife," states an Ibo anthropologist. "Sometimes, women even married the wives for their husbands, if the husband was hesitant or considered himself too poor to marry another wife."⁹⁴ The reasons for doing this were many. The Ibos at this time had no means of contraception. Because of their strong attachment to children, abortion was not an option. Very few women actually considered it. Consequently, having more than one wife constituted a form of family planning. Women were able to space out the birth of their children over two-to-three-year periods. This in turn ensured proper health for

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Polygamy among the Niger Ibos, an archbishop explains why her husband

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the women and in most cases, until pregnancies.

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An Honorable Position

Polygamy among traditional Ibos was never intended to devalue women. In his book Niger Ibos, G. T. Basden, an Episcopal archbishop and a historian of Ibo culture, explains why an Ibo woman preferred that her husband take more than one wife.

"To be the one and only wife is humiliating. It is a sure indication that her husband is a poor man. She would rather be the mistress controlling a number of other women than be a person of no importance. Also, instead of being alone, she prefers to have companions about her; in any case, there will be others with whom to share the household chores. The wife of a polygamous husband stands to gain considerably. She has more honor and respect from the community, freedom from loneliness and domestic helpers at her beck and call."

the women and the children. It prevented, in most cases, untimely deaths due to frequent pregnancies.

Polygamy also provided the women some rest from endless work. Considering the amount of work women had to do both within and outside the home, having more than one wife ensured that there were enough women to share the burden of housework, field work, and other responsibilities of an Ibo woman. It also meant that women had some time for themselves and their children.

Woman-Marriages

The counterpart to polygamy among the Ibos was the practice of "woman-marriages." While the traditional Ibos did not practice polyandry (a woman married to several men),

they did accept woman-marriages—a woman marrying other women in order to establish her own household. Women who married other women were called "female-husbands."

These marriages, for the most part, were not homosexual marriages. Ibo women married other women for several reasons. Some were barren women who married other women to bear children on their behalf. Others were older women who had lost all their children by death. The female-husbands adopted the children of their wives. Thus woman-marriage was a way childless women affirmed their value and secured their position in society.

Wealthy fertile women also married other women as an outward pronouncement of their wealth and independence. Such women divorced their husbands, bought land, and established their own compounds. An Ibo man describes his experiences as the son of a wealthy female-husband: "My mother was then a big trader and she needed someone to help in our house and so she married one wife after another."⁹⁵ The female-husband played the social role of father to the children of her wives. Their inheritance would come through her.

The women married to female-husbands were not devalued in any way. Woman-marriages underwent marriage processes and rituals similar to male-female marriages. Traditional Ibos considered both types of marriages vital to the survival of the community. In all marriages, women retained the freedom to leave a relationship if they felt uncomfortable, neglected, or abused.

Divorce

Divorce in traditional Ibo society was relatively easy to obtain. A man could divorce his

wife for adultery and neglect. Women divorced their husbands for reasons of abuse and neglect, or if the husband was a known thief or criminal. There were no undue hardships associated with divorce. The husband was entitled to the dowry he paid for the wife, when and if she remarried. The man retained legal custody of the children and the woman had visitation rights. "Consequently, divorced women were rarely considered a burden to themselves or their families. Women, who wanted to remarry, did so freely and repaid their dowries,"⁹⁶ writes Leith-Ross. Daughters were always welcomed home. And most families went so far as to ask their daughters to return if they were involved in an abusive relationship.

Widowhood

Because women married men who were at least fifteen years older than them, most outlived their husbands. Precolonial Ibo society, therefore, had rituals that widows were expected to observe. It also had set rules to protect the well-being of a widow and her children.

When a husband died, his wives underwent a period of mourning that lasted for a year. They were expected to crop their hair, live in seclusion, and wear rags for the entire period. As Leith-Ross explains,

They may go to market, but not to their own village market; they may farm, but they will be careful to go to their farms a little time after the others have gone out, as men do not care to meet a widow too early in the morning, lest the same fate befall them as befell the widow's late husband.⁹⁷

At the end of the mourning period, widows underwent a cleansing ritual and were reintroduced into society.

A woman whose husband died before they could bear a child had two options. She either returned home to her parents and remarried or she married one of her husband's brothers or his oldest son by another wife. Most of the time, the men were already married. But since polygamy was allowed, adding a new wife was not a problem. The interest of the new wife was protected and she was not treated differently from the other wives.

A widow with children had several options also. She could choose to remain unmarried, stay in her husband's home, and maintain her husband's property for her chil-

The Husband's Duty

Traditional marriages had specific expectations for men and women. It was the duty of the wife to bear children and maintain the household. Victor Uchendu, an Ibo ethnographer, describes the husband's function in his book The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria.

"The husband's main duty to his wife is to provide the conditions for her to maintain a thriving and expanding household. He must provide the domestic setting in which his wife works, and furnish her with a reliable supply of major staple foods from his farms. He must allot a household garden to each wife and provide palm fruits from his trees for the domestic use and for trade. The husband is also expected to allocate his cotton crop for his wife's trade, and to give periodic trade advances in money to finance her market activities."

dren. In such a case, the husband's relatives were expected to look out for her interests and protect her rights. She could also choose to marry her husband's brother and become one of his wives. A third option was to return to her parents' home with her children. And, as long as she remained unmarried, her husband's relatives were required to provide for her. When the children came of age, they were then expected to go back to their father's home to claim their father's property.

The laws governing marriage, divorce, and widowhood in precolonial Ibo society

maintained the people's communal way of life. But despite its emphasis on community rather than individual survival, there were genuine attempts to maintain equity and fairness. A woman reserved the right to reject the husband chosen for her by her parents. She could also, without many repercussions, leave a marriage she found unsatisfactory. And if she was widowed, there were established laws to protect her interests and those of her children. For the most part, traditional Ibo women had the freedom and the opportunity to decide their own fate.